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ABSTRACT

Schools fail to meet the schooling needs of many nonwhite students. Afrocentricity, a new curricular movement that looks through African eyes, focuses on improving schooling experiences for African-Americans. Some proponents view it as an answer to African-American student underachievement and say it enhances self-esteem, achievement levels, ethnic pride, academic performance, and positive identity formation. This position presents two new challenges. The first is the need to analyze implications of the dissimilar demographic profiles of the current White teacher trainee force and the increasing minority public school student population. The second is to analyze the congruity between the purposes of schools within the larger society, the role of teacher preparation within the purposes, and the goals of Afrocentric curriculum. Though 20 percent of all school-aged children are from minority groups, only 5 percent of teachers are black. Researchers question the probability of a predominantly white-American teacher trainee force addressing the overall educational needs of African-American students. They suggest that African-Americans de-emphasize schools as the vehicle for helping their students come to know themselves and, instead, encourage community-based centers whose purposes are central to and more far reaching than public schools. In the context of these two challanges, the paper examines schooling needs of African-American students (writing, speaking, reading, listening, thinking, studying, and test taking). (SM)

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# Schools, Teacher Preparation, and Afrocentricity: Is There A Possibility for Connection?

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Schools, Teacher Preparation, and Afrocentricity:

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Introduction

In 1978 the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education amended its standards to include a statement reflecting the urgency of preparing teachers to meet the needs of culturally diverse students. Since that time universities have been wont to show evidence of added courses, augmented course syllabi for existing courses, or mission statements that attest to the existence of cultural pluralism, i.e. multicultural education in teacher training curricula.

Multicultural education, in its broadest sense, is an appeal for reconceptualizing various aspects of schooling. A basic tenet of multicultural education is commitment of school personnel to addressing the needs of students from various ethnic and racial backgrounds. Interestingly, despite the time, effort and moral spirit surrounding attempts to bring multicultural perspectives into schools, the extent of school failure among non-white, non-middle class students (as evidenced by dropout rates and standardized test scores) is grossly apparent.

It appears that on the whole schools manage to fail to meet the schooling needs of a significant percentage of non-white, non-middle class students. Owing to this schooling reality and its historical, social, and political antecedents, in recent times a curricular emphasis known as afrocentricity has sparked interest among educators and lay public alike. Its primary focus

has been directed toward improving the schooling experiences of African-American children and youth.

What Is Afrocentric Curricular Emphasis?

Although disparity over its meaning abounds, the term "afrocentricity" has been utilized to refer to "a curricular movement defined as looking through African eyes or placing Africa at the center of study" (The Chronicle of Higher Education, p. 1, June 19, 1991).

> Molefi Kete Asante, . . .considered by some to be the founder of the Afrocentric philosophical movement . . .
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> . . . . . .
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> notes that '[a]frocentricity is a simple idea . . . . It's not a biological concept. It's not a racial-supremacy idea. It's the attitude of viewing phenomena from the standpoint of the African person as subject rather than object' (op.cit., p. 13, June 19, 1991).

To the extent that the history, literature and various other aspects of African-American culture can form the basis of contemporary elementary and secondary school curricula, some proponents of afrocentric curricular perspective view it as a probable answer to the problems of massive underachievement among African-American students in U.S. schools. Discussions generally focus on its potential to impact the achievement levels of African-American youngsters while simultaneously enhancing student self-esteem. Other proponents, though reluctant to attest to this expansive potential of afrocentric curriculum, identify

shortcomings of extant curricula while cautiously noting afrocentric emphasis may have a better chance of improving academic performance.

Arguably one of the more controversial issues surrounding afrocentric curricular emphasis is its potential to enhance self-concept, ethnic pride, and positive identity formation among African-American students. That student experiences and interactions in schools have been associated with these aspects of child development members of the African-American community have embarked upon closer examination of curricular offerings in schools. And to the extent that educators might be expected to embrace afrocentricity as a curricular innovation, it would appear that school people will be presented with fundamental questions related to how teachers are trained, and the idealized versus the actual role and function of schools in the future life choices of minority children and youth. Additionally, as interest in afrocentric curriculum grows, the urgency of exploring its true potential must be scrutinized.

In conjunction with such exploration at least two new challenges are presented regarding the possibility for a connection between teacher preparation and afrocentric curriculum. The first challenge represents the need to critically analyze the possible implications for the dissimilar demographic profiles of the current teacher trainee force and the ever-increasing minority student population in public schools. A second challenge is to analyze the congruity between the purposes

of schools within the larger society, the role of teacher preparation within those purposes, and the goals of afrocentric curriculum.

Teachers, Students and The Current Situation

Persons in preparation to be teachers are trained to meet student schooling needs by completing a specific teacher preparation curriculum. Included are studies of learning theory, teaching methodology, and subject matter specializations. However, although much of what trainees acquire through teacher preparation consists of the specialized knowledge of the teaching profession, it is too frequently under-acknowledged that by virtue of previous exposure to schools and familial culture, the average trainee has a storage of a priori familiarity with the intricacies of the teaching profession, or how to be a teacher. Also underemphasized in teacher preparation is the fact that trainees are generally prepared to meet the learning needs and information processing styles of majority culture students. Close examination reveals that perhaps by default, teacher training tends to be geared toward sustaining and to a great extent reinforcing the values and worldview of the mainstream culture largely to the exclusion of micro-cultural groups.

Because trainees are prepared to meet the schooling needs of students whose familial backgrounds and life experiences are similar to their teachers, problems are presented when teacher preparation programs are faced with the task of training teachers to teach students whose cultural backgrounds are dissimilar or

opposite those of the trainees themselves. The augmenting of accreditation standards reflects contemporary debates over the legitimacy of teacher preparation in this regard; and teacher educators have begun to confront issues surrounding the preparation of teacher trainees to accommodate the schooling needs of children from non-white backgrounds.

Interestingly, educators and demographers alike conclude recent population shifts present a daring challenge for those preparing to be classroom teachers. Mary Hatwood Futrell, former president of the National Education Association in a paper on multicultural education (1990) indicates "[t]oday, approximately 20% of all school aged children in this country are racial minorities; [and projections are]. . . that by the year 2020, 35% will come from racial minority families" (p. 1). Conversely, similar figures were not forecasted for minority teachers. Irvine (1988) indicated that by the year 1990 black teachers would comprise as little as five percent of the teaching force (p. 503).

Response to the potential problems implicit in the decreasing numbers of minority teachers and the increasing numbers of minority students has been to try to increase the number of minority teachers in preparation. However, recent trends seem to suggest that the problem may worsen before it improves. Irvine (1988) noted the decline of minority enrollment in teacher preparation is likely attributed to three major factors: 1) overall decline in black students attending colleges

and universities; 2) widening career options for blacks, especially black females; and 3) institutionalization of teacher competency tests.

The convergence of these factors (i.e. growing minority student populations, predominantly white teachers-in-training, and attempts to attract minority students teaching) seems to imply that a predominantly white teacher trainee force is anathema to the schooling needs of African-American children and youth. This disturbing suggestion evokes questions regarding the purposes of schools and the schooling needs of African-American.

What Purpose Does School Serve in U.S. Society?

Schools serve to support the existence and functioning of primary institutions that form the political, social, and economic structures or foundations as it were, of a society. In this role schools are allowed to exist for two major purposes; the first is to perpetuate society, while the second is to improve the society.

In relation to the first purpose, school people (i.e. teachers) transmit the existing cultural norms, value orientations, behavior patterns, etc. needed for the society to maintain the status quo. Herein a teacher's role is to train students in specifically defined content, skills, and attitudes so that they will eventually be able assume roles within the larger society.

Endemic to the first purpose for schools are teachers whose role it is to acculturate students to the existing societal

norms. Such is accomplished by inculcating specific worldviews and reality orientations. In maintaining the status quo, the emphasized worldview necessarily must be reflective of mainstream culture. Consequently, the knowledge of most worth, or the curricular emphasis (e.g. interpretations of history, orientations to literature, art, and language, and models for self-identification), will correspond to Euro-American, mainstream perspectives.

Conversely, the second purpose implies an orientation to schooling wherein the denizens of the land are believed not only capable but obligated to implementing change predicated on making society better and accountable to all its people. Implicit in this purpose is that while the majority rules, the rights and needs of the minority are protected and respected. Within this purpose, curricular orientations would necessarily reflect the pluralism within the society; and the work of teachers would best be described as a task in preparing students for life in a diverse world-society.

It is not apparent that U.S. schools embrace (to any significant degree) this second purpose for schooling. Historically, however, it would appear that in all aspects of their operations and functions, schools have tenaciously exemplified the first purpose. The degree of accuracy of this analysis has implications for the extent to which the concept of afrocentricity as a schooling curricular focus is incongruent with the very purpose, or raison d'etre for schools in U.S.

society.

In view of the racial background of the current crop of teachers in training and the prevailing purpose of schools in U.S. society, it seems inevitable that questions will arise. Forming the basis of such queries will be concerns over the suitability of extant curricular emphasis and the inherent capability of white teachers to address the emerging identity formation needs of African-American students. However, prior to fully examining these issues the actual schooling needs of African-American children and youth should be explored.

Schooling Needs of African-American Children and Youth

The schooling needs of African-American children and youth are similar, if not identical to the schooling needs of most American students. These schooling needs are so universal that they too frequently elude persons attempting to identify reasons for the persistent underachievement of African-American students. Students in general, and ethnic minority students in particular, need to be taught those literacy skills basic to negotiating life in U.S. society.

George McKenna, superintendent of schools in Inglewood, California, in a recent address to the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development listed basic skills "disadvantaged" students need to learn in order to be successful in schools.

* **Writing, Speaking, Reading** -- The inextricable relationship between the writing, speaking, and reading sub-skills needs to be emphasized in classrooms. To this end students

should learn that effective writing is related to both speaking and reading abilities. Basic to improving abilities in this triad of skills is developing the ability to communicate orally in standard form.

African-American students who speak non-standard "black-English" need to gain facility in standard U.S. English to such an extent that they are comfortable with its basic written grammatical rules and syntax. They need teachers who will advance their facility in standard English usage while simultaneously affirming their ability to speak black-English. The moral spirit of appreciation for diversity dictates teachers of African-Americans who speak black-English would not attempt to eradicate black-English; but instead would work toward facilitating students ability in two diverse and legitimate linguistic forms.

* **Listening** -- Knowledge that the predominant manner of instructional delivery in schools is through lecture style-auditory modes is widespread. Conversely, the preferred perceptual mode for most elementary, and a large percentage of secondary school learners is through a kinesthetic mode of interaction. Shade (1982) in an extensive review of literature on afro-american processing style indicated that no definitive research appears on the "preferred perceptual modes of <u>all</u> African-Americans". However, a definite urgency is presented when one considers the variance between the speech and familial interaction styles and patterns of poor African-American youngsters and the language and prevailing interaction styles

they encounter in schools. In short, African-American students regardless of preferred processing styles need to be taught listening skills that might help them connect better with the prevailing teaching modes.

* **Thinking** -- Life in the 21st century will require ability to make informed choices involving everything from food ingredients to political representation. Moreso than any other competence, the pre-requisite training needed for such are presented in the ability to think at varying energy levels. Historically, schooling for poor children has emphasized lower energy level thinking. Instruction in how to think should actively and deliberately go beyond lower levels in that it should be geared toward helping students develop certain attitudes or dispositions toward all information and "knowledge" they encounter.

The "questioning mind" disposition, or critical thinking instruction needs to be a basic part of schooling for African-American students. Instruction in critical thinking is crucial to facilitating the development of persons who will be able to effectively negotiate the social, political, and economic environments that have perennially confronted African-Americans in U.S. society.

* **Studying** -- Probably one of the basic attitudes that should be specifically taught to African-American students attending public schools is persistence to tasks they may view as mundane and irrelevant. Ironically, it appears this ability is

elemental to being successful in U.S. schooling systems. Given the prevailing purpose of school and its accompanying curricular orientation, perceptions of irrelevance in schooling activities and content seem predictable if not logical for African-American students from chronically poor familial backgrounds. Shade (1981) indicated that among other skills, successful black children seem to develop the ability to conform to expectations presented, while simultaneously being able to discern how to handle people in an environment (i.e. get what they must, while maintaining a sense of self).

**Test Taking** -- Historically standardized test results have been utilized in schools to predict student success potential. In recent times however, both validity and reliability of many tests have come under question. Unfortunately for many African-American students who score below "average performance levels" the interpretations of scores have resulted in their being assigned to schooling experiences that are less academically challenging or in some cases, academically stifling.

The academic experiences children have while in school have a tremendous impact on their future life choices. Because tests are widely used in U.S. society, the urgency of developing skill in test taking is apparent. When African-American students perform poorly on standardized tests primarily because they lack essential understandings of test taking they are in effect being sentenced to a watered-down, anti-intellectual schooling experience, and limited life choices.

McKenna identified these skills as important for disadvantaged students. To the extent that African-Americans are disproportionately disadvantaged, perhaps they need instruction in these skills moreso than other disadvantaged students. In order to develop proficiency in these skills however, African-American students need teachers who want to teach non-white students whose familial experiences are probably considerably different from those of the teachers. Also, they need teachers who perceive them as capable of achievement and success.

Various African-American educators, and others with particular interests in the school experiences of African-American students have noted poor children in general need teachers who will not tolerate failure. Steele (1990) suggests African-American students need teachers that will challenge them to look beyond a society which has historically encouraged African-Americans to internalized acceptance of their own inferiority. In short, African-American students need teachers who believe in them.

In light of these pre-requisite characteristics for teachers of African-American students the suitability of white teachers becomes critical. Are white teachers, who utilize what some have labeled a euro-centric curricular focus inherently unable to meet the schooling needs of the African-American students?

## Eurocentricity vs Afrocentricity: Where's the Problem?

In The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in

America Steele proposes that historically white-Americans have shared a collective guilt regarding the social, political, and economic state of blacks in U.S. society. Steele further proposes if whites are to be absolved of a similar current-day culpability, blacks must genuinely perceived whites as wanting to right wrongs of the past. A similar analysis regarding the crisis in schooling for African-American students can be proffered. In this regard it could be proposed that the predominantly white teaching force shares a collective sense of culpability for the cycle of failure experienced by African-American students in schools. To the extent that the Steele analysis is plausible, it can be similarly proposed that the predominantly white-American teacher trainee force genuinely desires to contribute to the success of African-American students in schools, and that African-Americans must embrace that white teachers genuinely desire to teach their children.

From this perceptual lens it would appear the predominantly white-American teacher trainee force and the so-called euro-centric curricular focus are not anathema to the schooling needs of African-American children and youth. However, in view of the undergirding purpose of afrocentricity as an alternative curricular emphasis, the probability of a predominantly white-American teacher trainee force being able to address the overall educational needs of African-American students is very seriously questioned. Ironically, it is the educational, as opposed to schooling needs of African-American students that are the central

focus of afrocentric curriculum and afrocentricity.

The elemental purposes of schools must be congruent with the social, political, and economic emphases of the larger society; and to this end it becomes apparent that afrocentricity as a curricular focus would be not only misdirected, but doomed to inevitable sabotage. Schools are inherently ill-equipped in human resources and moral grounding to address the far reaching goals of afrocentric curricular emphasis. Further, the more appropriate place for afrocentricity within pre-adult experiences for African-Americans should be in extra-curricular education that necessarily would need to extend beyond the aegis of schools.

African-Americans as a collective must de-emphasize schools as the vehicle for helping African-American students come to know themselves as is the intent of afrocentric curricular focus. Similar to the historic economic and political self-sufficiency efforts the call herein is for educational self-sufficiency programs. By virtue of their very reason for being, it would appear that schools cannot act in the authentic educational interest of African-American students.

Afrocentric Education: Its Rightful Place

Doubt over the probable convergence between three related entities (i.e. schools, teacher preparation, and afrocentric curriculum) is implicit in the question-title of this piece. The positions presented herein have been based on participation, observation, and analysis of work in and with schools. Collective analysis of these experiences suggests the public schools exist

to pursue a purpose in this society that inadvertently serves to perpetuate the historically disempowered and oppressed social, political, and economic positions of the poor. Because a disproportionately high percentage of African-American students come from poor families, these students' schooling experiences, have tended to be largely miseducative, if not anti-educative in nature.

In response to teacher preparation it would appear those who work with prospective teachers have a responsibility to facilitate the development of school professionals who are firmly committed to making schools more humane places for all children. For African-American students this means prospective teachers must be trained to teach the essential school skills and to expect success from <u>all</u> students. To this noble end, it would seem the particular content or curriculum emphasis as it were, would be largely irrelevant.

Teacher preparation's current course in multicultural education is clearly not enough to prepare prospective teachers for what awaits them. The current minuscule percentage of African-American teachers-in-training equally suggests that any emphasis on afrocentric curriculum in teacher preparation would be very highly improbable.

The rightful place and perhaps most appropriate place for afrocentricity is in community based extra-curricular programs designed for educating, as opposed to schooling, African-American children and youth. Therein youngsters should be provided the

cultural (i.e. educational) experiences they need to become fully functioning, self-affirming human beings.

There is no probability for a connection between schools, teacher preparation and afrocentricity; and African-Americans should not look for there to be. Rather, they should create community-based cultural centers for African-American children and youth whose purposes will be external to and more far reaching than U.S. public schools could ever hope to be.

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